Book review: Designing the Lush Dry Garden by Cricket Riley, Alice Kitajima, and Kier Holmes

- October 10, 2025

It's safe to say that when Ruth Bancroft (born in 1908) started her dry garden in 1971 at the age of 63, she had no idea that it would become a major source of inspiration for countless homeowners and attract visitors from all over the world. Initially, all she wanted was to finally put her potted succulents in the ground. But what she ended up creating ushered in a new era of water-wise gardening.

Ruth had been an avid gardener since moving to her husband's family orchard in 1939 and started a traditional garden around the main house in 1950 (think bearded irises and roses). Her interest in succulents began a few years later with the purchase of a single potted aeonium (*Aeonium* 'Glenn Davidson'), descendants of which are still growing in the garden. This marked the start of a significant collection of potted succulents (more than 2,000) that she grew in greenhouses.

Ruth Bancroft in 2004 at age 96. © Saxon Holt/PhotoBotanic 415-898-8880

The pivotal moment for the creation of Ruth's celebrated dry garden came in 1971. After the last orchard on the family property was removed, her husband, Philip, offered her three acres to create a new garden for her expanding succulent collection. There was only one condition: she would have to make do with whatever water the existing well provided. What a stroke of serendipity that Ruth's succulents didn't need much water! With the assistance of renowned local nurseryman and garden designer Lester Hawkins she began to design and plant the dry garden that would eventually attract global attention.

In 1988, financier and garden enthusiast Frank Cabot and his wife Anne visited Ruth's garden and were profoundly impressed. When they learned that there were no formal plans to preserve the garden for future generations, Anne Cabot suggested the creation of an organization dedicated to saving significant American gardens. This led to the formation of the Garden Conservancy in 1989, with Ruth's garden the conservancy's first project.

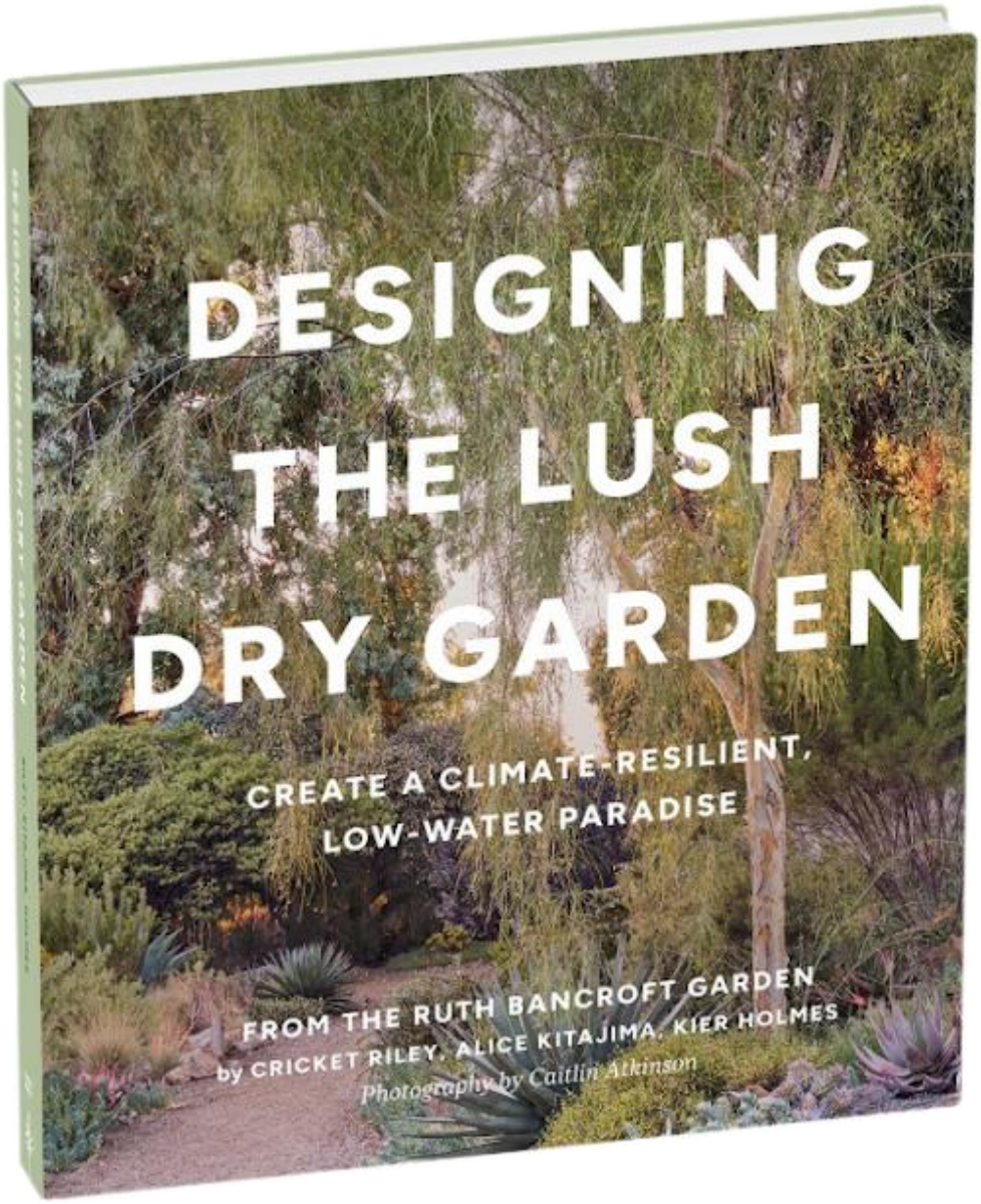
When the Ruth Bancroft Garden (RBG) officially opened to the public in 1992, Ruth was 84 — an age when most people would think of taking it easy. Not Ruth. She worked in her garden day in and day out until she was well into her 90s. And even after she laid down her trowel, she was able to follow the evolution of her garden for another decade and a half. She died in 2017, three months after celebrating her 109th birthday.

Alice Kitajima and Cricket Riley with their book

In March 2021, at the height of Covid, Cricket Riley, head of landscape design services at the RBG, and Alice Kitajima, program director in charge of education, launched the Dry Garden Design Certificate Program. Designed for homeowners and professionals, it teaches participants how to create sustainable, low-water gardens using climate-appropriate plants. Earning a certificate involves a combination of required and elective courses as well as a final design project.

At Cricket's garden party in celebration of the book launch

The curriculum of the Dry Garden Design Certificate, which focuses on the garden's pioneering methods and covers topics like botany, design principles, and plant selection, forms the basis of Cricket and Riley's book *Designing the Lush Dry Garden: Create a Climate-Resilient Low-Water Paradise*, published on September 30, 2025 by Timber Press. Drawing on the groundbreaking work done at the RBG, the book is as a masterclass in the principles of xeriscaping, challenging the notion that dry gardens are sparse or barren and instead showing how to achieve a vibrant, layered, and lush aesthetic using drought-tolerant plants. Rather than being academic and dry (haha, get it?), the book translates the practical design methods and horticultural knowledge from the RBG into actionable advice for home gardeners. This makes it an essential resource for gardeners in arid or summer-dry climates who want to create stunning, resilient landscapes that are both ecologically responsible and visually appealing.



The first half of the book covers a wide range of topics essential for successful dry gardening and guides the reader from initial inspiration to practical implementation. The central idea is that a garden with low water needs can be just as rich in texture, color, and form as a traditional water-intensive garden. Cricket and Alice emphasize smart plant choices and thoughtful design to create a thriving ecosystem that is both beautiful and sustainable.

The book is explicitly focused on climate resilience, addressing the challenges of gardening in an era of unpredictable weather and increasing drought by providing strategies to create gardens that “fare well in troubling times [and] inspire awe and wonder.”

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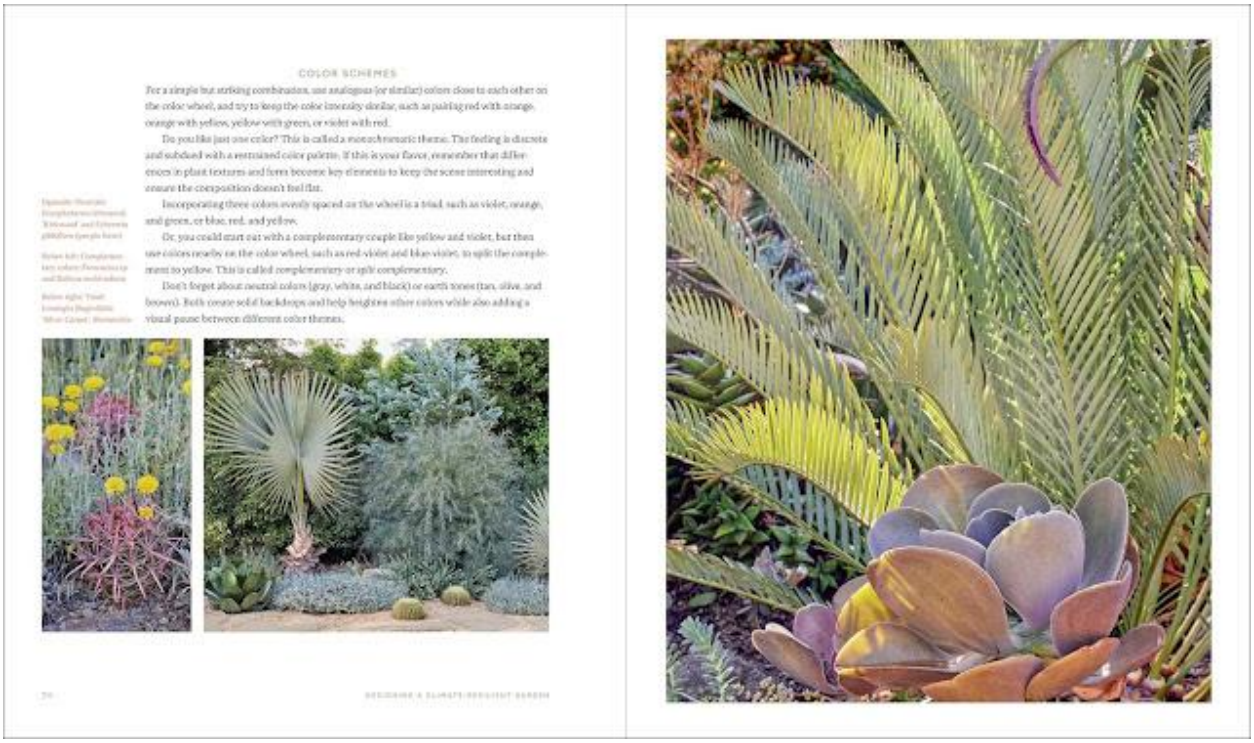
The book delves into fundamental design concepts such as creating structure, layering plants, and using color and texture to build a dynamic and cohesive garden. Stunning photographs from the RBG and private gardens illustrate these principles in practice.

Cricket and Alice offer hands-on advice on everything from soil preparation and planting techniques to efficient irrigation and ongoing maintenance and provide clear, actionable steps to help gardeners succeed.



COLOR SCHEMES

For a simple but striking combination, use analogous (or similar) colors close to each other on the color wheel, and try to keep the color intensity similar, such as pairing red with orange, orange with yellow, yellow with green, or violet with red.

Do you like just one color? This is called a monochromatic theme. The feeling is discrete and subdued with a restrained color palette. If this is your flavor, remember that differences in plant textures and form become key elements to keep the scene interesting and ensure the composition doesn't feel flat.

Incorporating three colors evenly spaced on the wheel is a triad, such as violet, orange, and green, or blue, red, and yellow.

Or, you could start out with a complementary couple like yellow and violet, but then use colors nearby on the color wheel, such as red-violet and blue-violet, to split the complement to yellow. This is called complementary or split complementary.

Don't forget about neutral colors (gray, white, and black) or earth tones (tan, olive, and brown). Both create solid backdrops and help heighten other colors while also adding a visual pause between different color themes.

About 50 pages are dedicated to showcasing a proven selection of plants that perform well in dry conditions. The list goes beyond the typical succulents and cacti to include a diverse range of trees, shrubs, perennials, ground covers, and vines that offer year-round interest.

The book also acknowledges the monumental contributions made by Brian Kemble. He started to work for Ruth in 1980 and just celebrated his 45th year at the garden. After Ruth died in 2017, Brian, as the garden curator, became the keeper of her legacy, guiding the evolution of the garden while making sure that it remains consistent with what Ruth would have wanted.

RBG garden curator Brian Kemble

The second half of the book features in-depth portraits of 17 home gardens in California designed by professionals and homeowners who have adapted Ruth's vision to meet the specific needs of their own spaces. Written by Kier Holmes and photographed by Caitlin Atkinson, these examples, which differ widely from each other and from the RBG, demonstrate that Ruth's principles are a flexible framework, not a strict formula. This empowers everyday gardeners to create climate-resilient sanctuaries of their own.

(At this point, I'd like to mention that although photographers often take a backseat, without their contributions, a book like this would be far less impressive. Caitlin Atkinson's remarkable images make the featured gardens and plants come alive.)

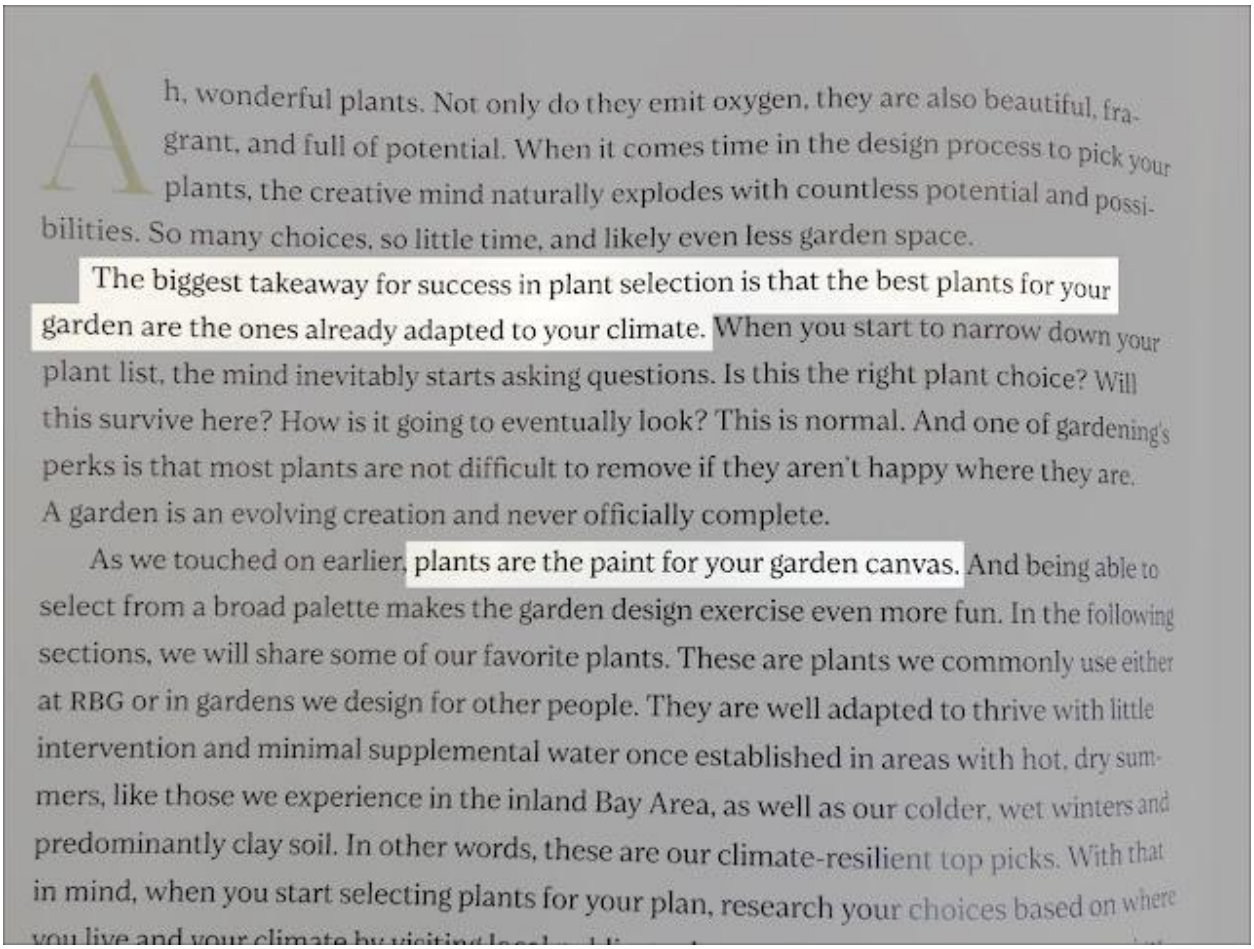
RBG garden director Walker Young's garden, one I'd love to see in person

Most of the gardens are new to me, but I've been fortunate enough to have visited a few, including the gardens of Max and Justin Cannon, Kipp McMichael, Troy McGregor, and co-author Cricket Riley.

Max and Justin Cannon's garden

Among the showcased gardens is one designed by my friend Mat McGrath; it's beautiful, but I wish it had been his one-of-a-kind personal garden instead (here and here). In addition, while I realize that each book has limitations imposed by circumstances (and the publisher), I wonder if the geographic scope could have been widened because Ruth's legacy resonates far beyond the borders of California.

But those are minor niggles, and subjective to boot. They take nothing away from what is a comprehensive and authoritative guide that is both aspirational and accessible as well as beautifully designed and photographed. *Designing the Lush Dry Garden* is an essential addition to any gardener's library, especially for those navigating the challenges of a changing climate — and isn't that all of us?



Ah, wonderful plants. Not only do they emit oxygen, they are also beautiful, fragrant, and full of potential. When it comes time in the design process to pick your plants, the creative mind naturally explodes with countless potential and possibilities. So many choices, so little time, and likely even less garden space.

The biggest takeaway for success in plant selection is that the best plants for your garden are the ones already adapted to your climate. When you start to narrow down your plant list, the mind inevitably starts asking questions. Is this the right plant choice? Will this survive here? How is it going to eventually look? This is normal. And one of gardening's perks is that most plants are not difficult to remove if they aren't happy where they are. A garden is an evolving creation and never officially complete.

As we touched on earlier, plants are the paint for your garden canvas. And being able to select from a broad palette makes the garden design exercise even more fun. In the following sections, we will share some of our favorite plants. These are plants we commonly use either at RBG or in gardens we design for other people. They are well adapted to thrive with little intervention and minimal supplemental water once established in areas with hot, dry summers, like those we experience in the inland Bay Area, as well as our colder, wet winters and predominantly clay soil. In other words, these are our climate-resilient top picks. With that in mind, when you start selecting plants for your plan, research your choices based on where you live and your climate by visiting local

Just a couple of the lines I underlined for myself

Designing the Lush Dry Garden: Create a Climate-Resilient Low-Water Paradise was published by Timber Press. It's available from all the usual sources, including your local independent bookstore, Amazon, and directly from the Ruth Bancroft Garden. While Cricket and Alice are no longer with the Ruth Bancroft Garden, they have donated their proceeds from the book to the garden.

RELATED POST

- Review of *The Bold Dry Garden*, Johanna Silver's 2016 book on the history of Ruth Bancroft and the Ruth Bancroft Garden

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Location: The Ruth Bancroft Garden & Nursery, 1552 Bancroft Rd, Walnut Creek, CA 94598, USA

Comments

1.

Kris Peterson*October 10, 2025 at 4:09 PM*

Thanks for the review, Gerhard. Now I'm ready to jump into the book!

Reply

1.

Gerhard Bock (Succulents and More)*October 11, 2025 at 7:06 AM*

You'll enjoy it!

2.

Pam/Digging*October 10, 2025 at 4:20 PM*

I'm glad to know more about this book, Gerhard. Thanks for sharing about it!

Reply

1.

Gerhard Bock (Succulents and More)*October 11, 2025 at 7:06 AM*

I think the book would be a great interest to readers in Texas!

3.

tz_garden*October 11, 2025 at 8:03 AM*

It's a fabulous book, thank you for recommending it! Walker's garden was a standout - as well as Max & Justin's and of course, Troy. I could've used a few more gardens, lol but I guess they had to stop at some point.

Reply

1.

Gerhard Bock (Succulents and More)*October 15, 2025 at 8:41 AM*

Agreed, more gardens would have been great, but I'm sure there was a page limit.

4.

danger garden*October 11, 2025 at 10:16 AM*

Great review! You've generously summed up Ruth and the garden's history for anyone unfamiliar. I look forward to reading it myself (just put one of the three copies our library has decided to purchase on hold!).

Reply

1.

Gerhard Bock (Succulents and More)*October 15, 2025 at 8:42 AM*

Thank you, Loree. Ruth's story is so unique, it bears to be repeated.

5.

Anonymous*January 11, 2026 at 8:14 AM*

Thank you so much for the generous review of our book!